

# “Sacrifice” two perspectives

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Christianity and its scriptures unabashedly use the language of *sacrifice* to describe both the life and death of Jesus Christ. The biblical references in the sidebar (page 6) demonstrate a variety of Old Testament offerings fulfilled in the saving death of Israel’s promised Messiah—from the Passover Lamb to the Day of Atonement.

The downside of this move is how the word *sacrifice* has religious connotations that run counter to the gospel and, when applied to the Cross, distort its meaning. When Christians weave pagan sacrificial systems into atonement theories, the tragic result is a misrepresentation of who God is, what God wants, the meaning of Jesus’ death and of salvation itself. For this reason, it’s important to distinguish between two opposing conceptions of sacrifice.

## “SACRIFICE” AS AN APPEASEMENT TRANSACTION

When I refer to ‘pagan sacrificial systems,’ I’m talking about the rituals of so many religions that sought to (a) appease their gods’ anger or (b) earn their god’s favor. The people would bring an offering to their priest, who would sacrifice it on an altar to their god, hoping to manipulate outcomes in their favor.

Popular examples of the former (appeasement) was the practice of sacrificing children or virgins to the gods of wrath. Jeremiah condemns the practice of sacrificing one’s firstborn as burnt offerings to Molech (see Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5, 32:35). Or take for example the sacrifices of human hearts and blood in Aztec religion. Or the ‘propitiation’ of rumbling volcano gods by tossing virgins into the lava.

Now imagine my horror when, as a seminary student, certain professors claimed this is precisely how the New Testament imagines the ‘atoning death of Jesus.’ To assuage the wrath of God against humankind, Jesus offered himself to bear the full weight of God’s fury against sin on himself. Salvation was accomplished and applied as we believed that Jesus’ death extinguished the flames of God’s anger. As N.T. Wright writes in his book, *The Day the Revolution Began*, wrath appeasement paganizes the gospel.

In the latter case (earning God’s favor), sacrifices are

transactional. God takes pleasure in those who have earned his blessings. The quality or quantity of the offering determines whether or how worthy one is of the gifts and grace of God.

But can you see the oxymoron there? Earning grace? Paying for a gift? And yet, isn’t that exactly the way of Christless religion? Salvation becomes a business contract to be negotiated. What a bargain!

## “Sacrifice” - definitions

1. The rite or rituals of offering something precious to a deity.
2. A costly act for the sake of an ideal, an end, or a person.
3. Advancing another runner in baseball at the cost of going out oneself.

## “SACRIFICE” AS SELF-OFFERING LOVE

Given such Christless concepts of sacrifice (and how they creep into the gospel), it would be tempting to ditch that language altogether. But apostolic preaching brings another perspective to the table. It sets up the contrast between pagan sacrifices and the gospel, where the sacrifice speaks of ‘costly love’ for the sake of the other.

Sacrificial love is not foreign to human experience. We see it whenever a woman endures labor to give birth to a child or cares for a newborn despite the pain and exhaustion. We see it whenever a firefighter rushes into a burning building or a forest inferno to rescue strangers and their property. That’s not appeasement and that’s not a transaction. It is a costly self-offering to save someone else.

This is the sense of ‘sacrifice’ in the Jesus gospel—God loved the world in this way: he sent his Son as pure gift to rescue and redeem his children from perishing and to gift them with eternal life. □

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